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ABSTRACT

As a part of the language arts curriculum, a mass media course can be structured so that it teaches reading and writing along with information about media. Young people should understand that media have the power to inform, entertain, persuade, and propagandize. A sample course can be based on current books and articles written about the media and divided into three week units on film, television, newspaper, radio, and popular music. A technique that has worked well in such a class is to begin each class with ten minutes of news brought in by students. Other projects that have proven successful with students are student produced commercials on videotape, student produced newspapers, and student conducted research on popular music groups. (MKM)

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MASS MEDIA CAN TEACH READING AND WRITING TOO

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MASS MEDIA CAN TEACH READING AND WRITING TOO

When I taught mass media, I began the first day of class by asking students this question: "How would your lives be different without mass media?" In preparation for the class, I asked myself the same question; and I was amazed at the answer. I never was a media fanatic, but I can remember countless childhood afternoons spent at the movies and countless hours spent viewing television. I learned more about Nazi Germany from Walter Cronkite's You Are There than I learned from history books, and my teenage memories blend forever with the sounds of popular records played at the time.

But these are minor effects of mass media considering that most Americans receive all international and national news and most local news from the media. This fact alone makes a knowledge of mass media imperative to all who wish to judge its content and combat its power if necessary.

In the late 1960's, educators also believed that mass media was too powerful to be ignored by the educational system, and mass media courses flourished. But in the late 1970's, mass media courses fell into disrepute. They were called noisy, do-nothing courses that lacked content and structure; and students elected to take them so they didn't have to read novels.

We all know that mass media courses can't compare with Shakespeare and mythology as literary exercise, and I would never suggest that mass media replace these courses. But I do suggest that mass media has a definite place in the language arts curriculum.

Young people should understand that media has power to inform, entertain, persuade, and propagandize. As a definite part of the language arts curriculum, a mass media course can be structured so that it teaches reading and writing along with information about media. Having taught composition, mass media, and remedial reading, I know that these courses can be combined to produce a strong mass media program, for I taught mass media this way at Fairview High School in Boulder, Colorado.

In 1968, as a first year teacher in Boulder, I was enthusiastic and eager to begin teaching mass media. My class was composed of a mixed group of students, grades 10-12 with varying intellectual and creative abilities.

I organized my course so that students studied the influence media had on them while they discovered how much their values and culture were reflected in the media. Students also became more informed citizens through daily news discussions and quizes. In conjunction with these course activities, students practiced and improved reading, writing, and communication skills.

I did not use a textbook in my course but based my units on current books and articles written about the media. My course was divided into 3 week units on film, television, newspaper, radio, and popular music. Students kept notebooks for lecture notes, daily news stories, and media observations; and I checked these notebooks for completeness every 3 weeks.

Every day of mass media class began with 10 minutes of news. Students were responsible for bringing news stories to class from any source available to them; and as they volunteered the day's

stories, I noted them on the transparency. The class then discussed these stories and took notes on them in preparation for a short answer quiz on Friday. These quizes included questions that related to politics, foreign affairs, or assignments in other classes.

The value of news discussions and quizes are unlimited. The students' growing interest in news motivated them to bring in better and more sophisticated stories. Sometimes students were so enthusiastic that discussion would extend well beyond the 10 minute period. A news discussion held recently in a 7th grade class illustrated this very enthusiam. The discussion took place in that weary last period of the day, and it was almost over when I asked students the final question, "Was Ronald Reagan too old to be President? Would age have some effect on his mind?" So many hands were in the air that I had a hard time deciding who to call on first. Everyone wanted to tell about his grandmother or grandfather or some older relative. One person had a 99 year old grandmother who gambled at Las Vages, and some had relatives as old as 103. Most were proud of even the small accomplishments of their families, but some were saddened by the way time had affected the people they loved. This class period taught students and myself more about old age than any textbook; and I was enlightened that young people had more contact with and sympathy for older people than I had imagined. A spirited exchange of ideas like this can occur often in mass media even as it does in a literature course.

By the end of the semester of mass media, I was teaching a group of well-informed, interested students who were able to support opinions with fact. These better informed students expanded their

reading interests becuase they had more background knowledge. Their performance improved in other classes as well because they had improved note-taking and test-taking skills.

Discussion of the news took 10 minutes of each period; the rest of the time was filled with activities from various units. At the beginning of each unit, I passed out objectives and explained how they would be accomplished. Objectives always covered a balance of reading, writing, and communication activities. This blend of skills with mass media content is well illustrated in my television unit.

A TV assignment on the comparison of TV and newspaper news was an especially good tool to guide students in analysis of the media while they refined their writing skills. According to the assignment, students watched TV for 5 nights and took notes on details of 3 stories each night. Then they cut out the same 3 stories from the newspaper and pasted them next to these notes. Finally they wrote an essay comparing TV and newspaper news based on their observations. Both notes and essays were due in 2 weeks.

I, of course, liked this assignment because it provided students with enough facts to write an essay, and they had these facts written down before they began the composing process. This assignment also provided me with an excellent opportunity to review slanting and the structure of the comparison-content essay.

Students liked the assignment also because the possibility of slanting in the news was an exciting idea for them; and for once, they could not voice their usual complaint, "I don't have anything to write about." Using this assignment, students wrote interesting, clear essays.

Writing an analysis of media news was hard work, making work on communication skills a definite change of pace. An interesting, lively TV assignment called for student production of commercials for videotape. In conjunction with the videotaping, students studied advertising gimmicks in order to include one of these gimmicks in their commercials. The students' purpose for making commercials was not to produce a videotape of technical perfection but to gain confidence while performing for a group and to cooperate with others to create a final product.

Making a videotape that is not perfect usually took 3 class periods. The first day, students organized and wrote their scripts in groups. Students exchanged ideas, rejected some, chose a director, and decided who did what part. The second day, students became quite involved in practice; and on the third day, students did the taping and played it back to themselves as an audience. To avoid a totally disastrous day 3 when the videotape and operator were ready, and no one was prepared for the commercials, I informed students that they must be prepared to tape on day 3 even if a group member was absent. Otherwise they would loose their grades for the activity. Because videotapeing was a relaxed activity, careful planning was necessary for its total success. Teachers in the surrounding areas were informed that the general noise level in our room would be higher than usual and that students would ask for hall space or conference rooms to practice.

Also students were informed on their limitations on costumes or props. One time, as a beginning teacher, I neglected to give my students any limitations on props. Unfortunately, I was absent

for practice, and a prim male teacher substituted for me. Not knowing the nature of my class, the man was shocked as a student rolled a motorcycle into my classroom to be used as a prop.

Ever after, I made careful preparations, and making commercials was a great success. Students became The Man from Glad, or Mrs. Oleson drinking her morning coffee, or that famous straight man talking about bad breath. And when the work was done, everyone enjoyed seeing himself on TV.

I always concluded my TV unit with an essay test that contained a question to cover each objective. One time, at the beginning of a year, students completely failed on my TV test. They were so shocked and indignant at their low test scores that the next day, I showed them a transparency with a question directly from the test along with an accepted method of answering the question, using reasons and examples. Students grumbled, took notes, asked questions, and improved their writing considerably for the next test. This exercise worked so well that when I taught the course again, I spent one day showing students how to outline for essay exams before they took their tests, and test-taking ability improved remarkably. For students and teacher alike, the TV unit was an enjoyable, worthwhile experience.

One of the most memorable experiences of my media teaching, however, was the time students created their own newspaper during a newspaper unit. First, students studied the organization of the newspaper and the types of articles in it; then they chose a role to play on the paper staff. Students were editors, reporters, copy editors, or typists. The editors helped the others choose

their assignments and organize their articles. Some also wrote rather unusual editorials. Copy editors corrected spelling and grammar of first drafts and sent the articles back to the reporters for rewrites. The typists from the "composing room" typed the finished articles on dittoes, and I ran these dittoes off for the finished paper.

The whole process took about a week and a half. At times, students had no assignments. Copy editors, for instance, could not make corrections until articles were finished. At these times, students read silently in the room.

Students were not graded competitively on their work because assignments took unequal amounts of time and talent. Rather students were given an accumlative grade based on attendance, responsibility, and the finished product. The newspaper contained articles that ranged from club news to sports to drugs. Editorials included a commentary on bearded teachers and a plea for more holidays at school as well as more serious comments on a do-nothing student council and the need for more work study programs.

Students spent the last day of the unit reading the finished papers together. They took the papers home, and I even ran out of papers because students from other classes wanted some too. Creating a newspaper as a class was successful in that students studied content, used their skills, and practiced responsibility as well.

One of the most successful mass media units, however, was my popular music unit. As a former lover of popular music, I lost interest in the subject when I left college; I therefore devised a unit for teachers like me who had little knowledge of or interest in current popular music. The unit is based entirely on student

research, writing, and participation, and its great benefit is that motivated students to do their English.

I used this unit with an entire class when I taught in a small town in Wisconsin with fantastic results. The course was not mass media but was called English for Non-College Bound Juniors. The course should have been called The Last Attempt to Teach English to Juniors Who Don't like English and Never Plan to Use it. The course was tough going. I team taught with 2 other sparkling English teachers, and the 3 of us tried every trick in the book to help students appreciate English. We team taught, switched students every 3 weeks, created appealing units; and still students did not respond, would not discuss, would not do homework, and would not study for tests. As a last resort in March, I decided to use my popular music unit with them. The students first assignment was to write a biography of a rock star or group and give an oral report.

Kathy Anderson, who had been the most totally turned-off student the entire year led the class in enthusiam. I brought in books and magazines from the library so that students could research for their reports, and Kathy brought in arm loads of magazines from home to help the others with their research. Students were thrilled with the magazines and began to do some thorough, complete research. I even had to check students walking out the door to be sure none of the magazines disappeared.

When Kathy gave her report on The Runaways, a rock group made up of then teenage girls, her report was the first and the best, filled with detail. Kathy told of the group's history and style; and she turned in a 20 page paper that was fairly well written. The rest of the class followed her lead, giving thorough,

interesting reports; and the rest of the unit followed with students giving satisfactory, if not enthusiastic participation. The pop music unit was an excellent tool to motivate students to research, write, and report.

Whether we admit it or not, mass media is a pervasive influence in our lives and the lives of our students. Mass media should be studied so that young people become aware of its influence and control it if necessary. A well constructed mass media course not only teaches the implications of mass media, but it helps students improve reading, writing, and communication skills.